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Rural Education and Alternative Communities

by

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Rural Education and Alternative Communities*

Steve Kay**

Abstract

Results of interviews conducted among a sample of long-term rural residents and back-to-the-land immigrants in a small community in a rural county in Kentucky are compared for values held and attitudes toward the public school system. The present situation is analyzed in light of the controversy over cultural pluralism and subsequent actions taken earlier in this century to deal with immigrant children in the U.S. schools. Suggestions are offered for making relevant policy decisions and for ways of establishing positive interaction between rural public schools and their new constituents.

We have been hearing for many years, and from many sources, about changes in the cultural landscape: about counter-culture,

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back to the land, communes, communities, decentralization, simple living, alternative technologies--in sum, about a change in values which had its most forceful expression, if not its beginnings, in the late nineteen-sixties.(1) There are many questions to be asked about the nature and meaning of this change; indeed, some people question whether there has been a change at all. Rather than address those questions in detail, I will state a few assumptions which lie behind the reasoning in this paper. First, that there is a continuing counter-cultural movement which had its greatest impetus in the late nineteen-sixties. Second, that participants in that movement are self-consciously aware of opposition to a range of dominant cultural values. Third, that the general outlines of the values of participants in this counter-cultural movement include aspirations toward: 1. spiritual as opposed to material well-being, with a consequent emphasis on simple living; 2. closer contact and harmony with nature; 3. independence from the dominant economic system; 4. independence from, or the re-shaping of, major cultural institutions. The first three sets of values fit well with rural areas, where simple living, harmony with nature, and independence have been continuous historical themes. This fit explains in part why one aspect of the counter-culture has involved a desire to settle in rural areas.(2) It is the last point --independence from, or reshaping of cultural institutions-- which I wish to consider in this paper. In particular, I will be focusing on the public schools, which are the major institution in many rural areas.

In what follows I present one situation which can plausibly be described as a traditional rural community which has come to have an overlay of immigrants who are children of the 'sixties. These are immigrants in a technical rather than a traditional sense. They do not come from a foreign country nor do they speak a foreign language. Nonetheless, they are immigrants in the sense of having moved to a new place to live, and there are differences between them and the native population of the locality to which they have moved. These differences exist even though many of the immigrants come from the same region of the state, or a different region of the same state, or from a similar region in a neighboring state. The immigrants are identifiable as a group just as foreign born immigrants in the earlier part of this century were identifiable as a group: by their speech, their dress, their customs, their values, their manner of socializing, and their group coherence. The present day immigrants are not so obviously different from their neighboring natives in these ways, and they may not be different in all of these ways. The best testimony to the existence and significance of these differences, however, comes from the continued identification of these individuals as a distinct group.

If the parallel between earlier immigrants and the present group is not exact and complete, there is a corresponding difference between the present native population and the native population earlier in the century. Immigrants to the United States at the turn of the century and throughout the early decades of the

century arrived to face a population with a strong sense of their country's position and mission in the world. Belief in progress, optimism about the future, and righteousness about this country's role in leading the world were dominant themes if not universal beliefs. There was little question that immigrants would do well to adopt the values and customs of their new land.

These views were reflected in the schools, and in the debate which began in that period between the advocates of cultural pluralism and the advocates of assimilation. While the cultural pluralists had their position and their supporters, even those whose philosophy of education seemed to lead to support for cultural pluralism never mustered the theoretical or practical support necessary to advance the position.(3) In the theoretical debates which occurred amongst educators (who were, for the most part, members of the native population), the advantages of maintaining cultural differences and supporting them in societal institutions such as the schools did not weigh heavily enough against the argument for the necessity for cultural homogeneity. Immigrants themselves were usually poor, uneducated, unable to use English well, and thus at a great disadvantage in trying to articulate, protect, and promote their values. In addition, they were combatting an institution at the height of its growth and power. Education, and particularly formal schooling, was seen as the answer to all social ills. There was widespread confidence in the power of the schools to improve society and to improve any individual's position in society. Upward mobility was a byword.

In contrast, present immigrants come to rural communities with more education, at least equal ability to use the language and articulate their values, greater economic independence if not actually higher economic status according to standard measures, and a stronger belief in maintaining and strengthening the values which they have brought with them. (4) The new rural immigrants also confront, in the school system, an institution which has become progressively weaker since the first third of the century. Many cultural institutions, but particularly the schools, are in a period of grave doubt about their mission and grave doubt about their ability to provide adequate services to many segments of the population. They are experiencing fading support from the general population. In sum, where earlier immigrants were ill-equipped and faced a confident cultural system, the new immigrants are well-equipped and face a cultural system full of confusion and doubt.

That is the general picture. Now let us turn to the specifics of one place. The greatest part of the information for what follows comes from direct observation and interviews conducted as part of a research project investigating school-community relations in East County (a pseudonym). * Some information comes from personal contact which preceeded the project and has continued

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parallel to its work.

Let me briefly sketch the situation in East County. The county is highly rural and sparsely populated. It has no major transportation link--interstate highway or railroad--and virtually no industry within its borders. Central Town, with a population of 1,500, serves as the county seat, major center of trade, and location of the one elementary school, junior high, and high school which together serve a school-age population of approximately sixteen hundred. The county's population peaked at seventeen thousand at the turn of the twentieth century, when the river which serves as one of its borders was still the major route for transportation. Population has declined slowly but steadily through the century to a low of 7,500, where it has been stable over the last decade. In the early 'seventies a group of immigrants began to settle around River Town, one of four smaller towns in the county. By nineteen eighty approximately sixty adults and children within the county could be identified as more or less connected to River Town and to one another as a group.

Some immigrants chose this county because of ties which existed to natives of the county or to one of the first groups of immigrants. Many have associations which stem from their days at the state university, or a private college within the state, or at another state university where one individual had ties to the county. Most have college degrees. Most have an active interest

in art, craft, and literature. Most came to the county in their twenties and are now in their early thirties. Most have no prior familial or other ties to the county. They have chosen life in a rural area consciously, and they engage in farming for some or all of their subsistence and livlihood. Most have married within the last ten years and live in traditional family units. Most have had one or more children within the last five years.

This last fact brings us to the main point of this paper. As their children approach school age, the immigrants are forced, by virtue of the compulsory schooling laws, to have their first thoughts about, or contact with, the dominant culture's institutional systems. For the most part, this forced meeting with the schools is comfortable for neither side. In earlier times this fact itself would have served to set the group apart from its neighbors. But East County is heir to the general decline in support for public schools. We thus find many similarities in attitudes towards the school among individuals who are natives and those who are immigrants to River Town.

First complaints for natives and immigrants alike usually center around three circumstances which East County shares with many rural areas. The first concerns the lengthy transportation which consolidation of schools has made necessary. Children from River Town and the surrounding area spend up to three hours each day traveling to and from school. Many parents feel that the time spent on the bus is not merely wasted, but detrimental to their

children's well-being. The second concerns the difficulties caused by the county's having decided to build an open classroom elementary school a decade ago and having shortly thereafter abandoned the open classroom concept. Even the recent addition of partitions has not eliminated the feeling that there is distraction created for students by the open spaces. The third concerns the feeling that the schools are oriented to the residents of Central Town. Related to this last concern is the feeling that residents of River Town are not welcome in the school or in groups such as the P.T.A.

Despite some positive responses from all individuals interviewed, and mostly positive reponses from a few people, answers to an open question about feelings about the school system are best characterized as negative. Native and immigrant opinions alike reflect the lowered status of the public schools. Immigrants thus have support from River Town natives for their criticisms of the school system.

There is an additional category of concerns, however, which natives and immigrants share, but which reveal differences rather than similarities. In its simplest form, this difference can be characterized as native desires that the schools prepare their children to earn a living and immigrant desires that schools prepare their children to be self-sufficient. While it is not the case that all immigrants share one set of values and all natives share another, opinions which are at the most traditional end of

the spectrum on these issues belong exclusively to members of the native group while those at the most progressive end belong exclusively to members of the immigrant group. Placed individually on the spectrum, the natives would be grouped toward the traditional end and the immigrants would be grouped toward the progressive end.

Natives tend to believe that the schools should perform their traditional chore of training children in the basic academic skills of reading, writing and arithmetic. Their criticisms are that the schools are not doing this basic job well enough. In contrast, here the counter-cultural aspect of the immigrants comes to the fore. They tend to see schools as one set of traditional institutions which have failed the society by becoming too remote from real needs. They view preparation for life within the economic mainstream and the way it is conducted within schools as part of the problem. They are as concerned as the natives that their children become self-sufficient in the world, but they define self-sufficiency not simply as mastery of basic school skills and the ability to get and hold a job. They define self-sufficiency as the direct skills needed to feed, clothe, and house oneself, and the ability to understand and deal successfully with the natural and social forces in the world. Thus they emphasize fostering independence, creativity, initiative, curiosity, and personal skills. In sum, the immigrants believe that formal schooling as presently conducted may interfere with rather than foster the kind of educational growth they desire for their

children.

While both groups have criticisms to voice about discipline, homework, and curriculum, examination of the basis for these criticisms reveals a set of differences which reflect in particular ways the greater scepticism of the immigrants about the institution of schooling. Reflecting general native sentiment about disciplining children in the schools, one mother comments: "They need to have more direction and discipline." Another says: "If they do something wrong at school, they should correct them, just like I do at home. If they need paddling, they should be paddled." Most immigrants either make no direct comment about discipline or imply that the children are capable of handling themselves well enough. Indirect expressions of feelings on the topic by immigrants reflect objections to "the bureaucratic rigidity of administrators and teachers" in dealing with their children.

Comments from natives on homework reflect a feeling that education is primarily the responsibility of the schools and should be accomplished during school time. In the most extreme expression of this feeling, one native mother says, about having to teach children at home: "That's what we send them to school for. I don't mind helping them, but their ABC's, they should teach them that at school." She suggests that students should have a study period at school as time to do their homework. She also objects to field trips as not being educational. By contrast, no

immigrants object to the level of homework. Rather, there are statements that their children are not challenged by the school curriculum, that the curriculum does not relate well to the everyday world, and that the curriculum teaches little in the way of practical life skills. One immigrant mother made extensive critical notes about a particular text used by her child.

Immigrants, with their higher levels of eduation, have more familiarity with popular and professional writing about schools, and their opinions reflects this. One important manifestation of this exposure is their willingness to entertain notions of alternatives to public school and to take actions to create or take advantage of alternatives. One series of such actions involved attempts to set up home schooling situations. For one mother who kept her children home this meant a tangle with school officials and then the county court system. Another mother reluctantly enrolled her children in the schools rather than face the same battles.

A second series of actions involved meetings about establishing an alternative school in the River Town area, and the attempt-- unsuccessful--to get a house certified as suitable for an alternative school. While some natives attended those meetings, the general feeling expressed was that an alternative school was not a good idea. One native mother said: "I felt sorry about not being able to support (the meeting orgnizer), but I think the children are better off in our schools, even with the

bus ride."

A final series of actions is ongoing. Some immigrant children are enrolled in a Montessori school in a nearby city, and there is continued discussion about establishing such a school--or any alternative school-- in the River Town area.

What does all this mean for those responsible for the school system, for those interested in the welfare of the school system, and for those more specifically interested in the welfare of their own children? Most obviously, those responsible for the schools will have a harder time clinging to traditional values and ignoring the needs of the immigrant community than did their predecessors earlier in the century. There is less support for the schools, less agreement on their proper mission, less agreement on the particulars of what they should be teaching. Even "those responsible for the schools"--school boards, administrators, teachers--are less united than their predecessors in the front they present to the public. Immigrants, with more confidence in their values and more willingness to both challenge the school and seek alternatives to it, have some general support for their position.

Members of the immigrant group present a challenge and an opportunity to the school system. The challenge comes from the immigrants' suspicion of, and alienation from, traditional institutions. They may see the schools as rigid in curriculum, authoritarian in relation to students, overly bound by state and

federal regulations, overly bureaucratic, and inaccessible. The opportunity comes from their level of education, their high level of interest in their children's education, and their history of interest in social improvement. To the teachers and administrators willing to work on establishing contact and ongoing communication, the immigrants can be a resource for the system, both in terms of active support and in contribution to a dialogue for improvement of the system. Without such effort the stage is set for difficulties and conflicts. Despite the many ways they have become accepted as part of their new community, these immigrants will not be easily assimilated. There is a real danger that they will be sufficiently alienated from the school system to continue to seek and find alternative methods of schooling for their children. Such an outcome would be detrimental to the school system itself and to the sense of community in the county. All of which suggests that the schools ought to be aware of their new constituency and to seek ways to accomodate their interests.

On the other hand, immigrants ought to be aware of the difficult position in which the school system finds itself, for clearly they are not the system's only constituents. Other constituents have other desires of the schools which, at least on the surface, seem not compatible with immigrant desires. Immigrants interested in the general welfare as well as the education of their children ought to seek possible ways, without sacrificing their values, to be open to the prevailing values expressed in the schools and to be sensitive to the sometimes opposing

views that have been excluded from expression in the schools. Ideally there would be a balance between working for inclusion of their values and willingness to support some values presently operative within the schools.

Recognizing diversity within each level of community alerts us to the need for understanding, and for a tradeoff in the functioning of community institutions. By definition, community institutions are held in common. Where there is diversity within a community there are-- again by definition--differences in values, needs, and desires, not all of which can be met at the same time in the same way. Once people abandon the myth that everyone can have what he or she wants from institutions or resources held in common, there is ground for discussion and debate aimed at accomodating as many interests as possible.

If all sides become aware of the difficulty of the situation, the possibility exists for dialogue and the creation of a kind of pluralism which evaded the schools earlier in the century. At that time the needs and desires of the immigrants were virtually ignored by a cultural institution powerful enough in relation to them to be able to do so with little threat to its status. However, the losses--to the institution of schooling itself, to the immigrant parents and community, and to the general society--caused by that wholesale suppression of cultural difference are inestimable. There is no need to repeat such a mistake, and there are grounds for believing that the schools now have more to

lose by following such a path.

Present immigrants come to the situation with divergent values but also with many skills which could be utilized by the school system. To this point, like their native neighbors in this particular community, they have not felt welcome in the schools. With effort from both the immigrants and the schools this situation need not continue. One starting point for this effort might be dialogue about the differences which exist among the constituents of the schools, and the subsequent search for ways either to reconcile seeming differences or to make space within the system for differences which are not reconcilable.

The difficulty most citizens have in imagining that such a dialogue could be initiated and have success indicates how remote schools are from all of their constituents. From this perspective, immigrants are only a more obvious case of a pervasive problem for school systems. Nonetheless, I offer the following simple suggestions as reasonable beginning places for any members of rural communities who believe that the schools could be improved by increased dialogue. These suggestions could be carried out by the school board, or school administrators, or existing school or community organizations, or a group of citizens formed specifically for the purpose. Ideally, individuals from all categories would be interested in working on such a project and would be welcome to do so.

The first step would be gathering information about the range of community opinions about the schools. This could be done through simple questionnaires, or interviews, or informational meetings. The second step would be organizing the information and making it available to the community for further comment and discussion. The third step would involve a frank appraisal of what particular expressed needs the schools meet at present and what modifications, if any, might be made to meet additional needs. Here members of the community might be enlisted to assist the schools in their task or to devise and implement additional programs to expand educational offerings.

Dialogue by itself does not solve problems, but effective dialogue and the understanding which follows from it uncovers areas of agreement, common goals, and existing possibilities for cooperative action and problem solving. Dialogue can also create mutual respect among those who have genuine and sincerely held differences of opinion. As a process, dialogue creates possibilities for further cooperation. Most school systems, and most communities, need as much of this as they can get. Rural school systems and communities are fortunate that the conditions for re-instituting genuine community dialogue still exists for them.(5) They need only take the initiative.

Footnotes

1. Two early expositions of the general argument for the formation of a counter-culture are: Theodore Roszak, The Making

of a Counterculture (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969); and Charles A. Reich, The Greening of America (New York: Random House, 1970). Two books which address the interaction between alternative technology and culture are: E.F. Shumacher, Small is Beautiful (New York: Harper and Row, 1973); and Hazel Henderson, Creating Alternative Futures (New York: Berkeley Publishing Corp., 1978).

2. For a discussion of the link between alternative culture and land themes--what the author refers to as "American Pastoralism," see Bennett M. Burger, The Survival of a Counterculture (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

3. The best contemporary discussion of the issues of cultural pluralism is found in Seymour W. Itzkoff, Cultural Pluralism and American Education (Scranton, P.A.: International Textbook Company, 1969). Of particular interest are his chapter on "Dewey and Cultural Pluralism" and his discussion of Dewey's most prominent followers who continued to argue the pluralist position, Horace Kallen and I.E. Berkson.

4. Calvin L. Beale, The Revival of Population Growth in Nonmetropolitan America, ERS-605, Economic Research Service, U.S.D.A., June 1975. Peter A. Morrison, with Judith P. Wheeler, "Rural Renaissance in America? The Revival of Population Growth in Remote Areas," Population Bulletin, v.31, #3 (Population Reference Bureau, Inc., Washington, D.C., 1976).

5. For the ways in which rural culture is well-suited for currently needed changes in education, see Paul Nachtigal, "Rural

Education: The Next Fifty Years," The Rural Educator, v.2, #2, Winter 1980-81, pp. 30-35.